The Analogical Pattern of Eliot's Prose

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In his book *Gadya o Padyer Dwandwa*, written in Bengali, Sisir Kumar Das notes: 'Poetry does not have the freedom of prose, again prose does not have the freedom of poetry... If one does not want to appropriate the space of the other, there is hardly any chance of any conflict between them' (Translation mine) (17). In the book, he comments upon the dialectical relation of prose and poetry and elaborates it. Initially prose was exclusively the language of communication and business, hardly different from speech. Poetry was born from the urge to distinguish the language of feeling from the language of business and day-to-day communication. Poetic language is richer, for it is endowed with the value of universality. Hence after the birth of poetry prose came to be looked upon as 'inferior'. Small wonder that literary authors preferring prose as the vehicle of communication would try to bring it closer to poetry so that it could also bear the load of emotive expression. In the process, the more prose drifted towards poetry, the more it was distanced from the language of everyday communication, leading to the formation of prose-varieties – prose for ordinary communication and literary prose. Gradually the dispensability of the metrical veneers was discovered and Sidney in *An Apologie for Poetry* had the insight as well as boldness to assert: '...it is not riming and versing that maketh a Poet, no more than a long gown maketh

an Advocate, who though he pleaded in armor should be an Advocate and no Soldier' (Collins 12). As poetry started discarding the ornaments of metre, the distance between prose and poetry got further reduced, giving birth to what is known as poetic prose and prose poetry. In other words, prose acquired literary flavour and poetry, by walking naked, became its near kin.

No one is likely to object to this description in so far as literary prose signifies the language used in genres like the novel or the short story and similar other forms of creative writing. It is certainly true about the language of Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story "Pragoitihasik" ("The Primitive") or the passionate prose of the novels of Hardy or D. H. Lawrence. The following description of the Egdon Heath in the first chapter of Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) may be cited as an example:

> The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread... The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it... (3-4)

It is emotive prose at its best, in taste and character hardly different from poetry. But the language of criticism, although a brand of literary language, cannot thus aspire to be poetic. Critical language derives its strength from the sharpness of argument not the softness of feeling or the charm of expression. The prose used in criticism, be it theory or literary interpretation, is more cerebral than emotive; it is less delicate, more analytical. Its forte is unadorned straightforwardness as distinct from figurative obliqueness which is the staple of poetry. This is no doubt true, but does it apply to the prose of all critics of distinction? Perhaps not. The prose of Eliot in his critical essays, especially in the *The Sacred Wood*, like the prose of

Rabindranath Tagore in his essays on education and literature, has a unique flavour. As it is critical writing, Eliot naturally banks on the force of his argument. He logically defends his points and draws his conclusion with the enviable analytical skill and convincingness. Yet his prose is never dry like the dull prose of most philosophical treatises. Rather even the most subtle Eliotean critical crux attracts readers, thanks to the language in which ideas are couched. As a result far from feeling scared to wrestle with intellectually challenging ideas, readers of Eliot's prose find interest in ploughing through his prose with greater attention.

What is the chemistry of this attractiveness of an otherwise bland persuasive discourse, light-year away from the delicious emotive language of poetry? True, the beauty of the language of Eliot's own poetry is a beauty borrowed mostly from fragmented and crystalline images, staccato rhythm, jerky metre, *vers libre* and a conscious attempt 'to force, if necessary to dislocate language into meaning', to borrow his own phrase from "The Metaphysical Poets" (*SE* 77-78). *A. C. Partridge rightly observes that 'the language in most of Eliot's poems is not only audacious but lacking in intelligible connections' (141).* Yet there is an underlying jingle which can hardly be suppressed despite utmost efforts to abandon the conventional trappings of poetic language. Consider for example the following lines:

> The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
> Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.
> The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,
> Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.
> I an old man,
> A dull head among windy spaces. ("Gerontion" 11-16, *SP* 31)

Or,

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sandy road
> The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand ("The Waste Land" 331-37, *SP* 64)

One understands why in his essay "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (1933) Eliot identifies 'auditory imagination' which consists in sensitivity to rhythm and syllables as the true poetic instinct. But prose when it is used in a discursive context cannot create this effect through verbal refrain, parallelism or similar other poetic attributes. Yet Eliot's prose, while it appeals to our cerebral cortex, simultaneously hypnotizes us. Why?

In the 'Introduction' to his edition of three of Eliot's essays Shiv K. Kumar comments on Eliot's prose style in the following words:

> 'There is here no attempt to mystify the basic issues, no vacillation, no warping of attitudes – only a relentless quest for clear vision and sharp definition. He brings to bear on his subject an originality of insight and a wealth of documentary detail which make the central argument almost irrefutable' (1).

Much of the absorbing power of Eliot's critical prose consists in the use of inimitable verbal twists such as 'And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art' (*SW* 99). The gripping power is no less due to occasional flashes of smartly phrased paradoxical statements like the one Eliot uses to shed light on the complex relation of an original work to the existing order: 'it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual or it appears individual and may conform' (*SW* 51). But these alone do not wholly account for the arresting impressiveness of Eliot's prose. If delved deeper, one would surely be convinced that the captivating grace owes a lot to Eliot's apposite use of analogy. In criticism, every point is to be driven home logically, and use of analogy in critical

prose is very unusual. In his prose Eliot, however, establishes his point with intellectually convincing reasonings and then, in order as if to bring it down from the plane of abstract intellection, uses an analogy to concretize the abstract postulate vindicated in the context. A close study of the language of some of Eliot's major critical essays will bear testimony to this conclusion.

In 'The Perfect Critic' Eliot criticizes the impressionistic critics whose 'sensibility alters the object, but never transforms it' (*SW* 6). He distinguishes Coleridge and Arthur Symons from inferior critics of the school but also dwells upon their individual flaws. Coleridge had metaphysical interest and as a critic he not only ignored the content of the work at hand but would often arouse 'the suspicion that he has been diverted into a metaphysical hare-and-hounds' (*SW* 13). The parallelism involved in the phrase helps the reader immediately conceptualize what Eliot points out as the main demerit of Coleridge's philosophically oriented literary criticism – its lack of objectivity as a result of which an insightful critic of Coleridge's stature is often guilty of supporting both sides of an argument. Of all the impressionistic critics, Eliot hails Swinburne as a more reliable guide. Nevertheless, he puts Swinburne in the bracket meant for 'imperfect' critics. This is less for 'the tumultuous outcry of adjectives, the headstrong rush of undisciplined sentences' (*SW* 17) which Eliot describes as 'personal' faults of style. What Eliot finds inexcusable in Swinburne is the unwillingness to draw conclusions. The punch-line of his criticism of Swinburne is embedded with an image that vividly pictures Eliot's point of objection: 'the drum is beaten, the procession does not advance' (*SW* 21). It is not that Eliot has not logically established that Swinburne is more an appreciator than a critic. But he clinches his point with a masterstroke that is hardly dispensable, for it helps one grasp his point that Swinburne appreciates well but hardly takes any evaluative stance expected from a critic worth his salt.

Historical sense and tradition are two highly loaded terms in Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Tradition, according to Eliot, involves a historical sense about the "presence" of the past, a recognition of an 'order' – 'complete' before 'the supervention of novelty' and getting modified when a novel work creeps in and gets absorbed in it. Eliot contends that this tradition cannot be 'inherited', it must be obtained, by 'great labour' (*SW* 49). According to Eliot, every poet must 'continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career' (*SW* 52) and that by neutralizing the pull of personality, Eliot, therefore, looks upon the progress of an artist as 'a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' (*SW* 53). This metaphorical self-immolation establishes a clarifying correspondence between the self-sacrifice of an individual for a noble cause and the commitment of an author to greater self-effacement. Admittedly, minus this image it is impossible for readers to grasp that Eliot expects artists to be detached from their personality with uncompromising earnestness. Eliot emphasizes the importance of tradition without which an author will have no mooring to cultivate the individual talent. Now carrying a historical sense in one's vein may impinge on one's originality as an artist. In order to shed light on this intricate idea about being *original* and simultaneously being *indebted* to one's predecessors, Eliot introduces the analogy of stealing. In his essay "Philip Massinger" he argues that authors may make use of a common source of ideas or draw imagery from a shared repository. But whatever is taken from a common source must be absorbed and assimilated before it is presented, or else it will be a distortion of the model well-established in culture by a senior poet. It is in this context that Eliot observes that the art of borrowing is one of the surest of tests (of indebtedness): 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different' (*SW* 125). The metaphorical evocation of the theft-image entrenches the subtle distinction

between the creative and the distortive use of a source that Eliot has in mind. It certainly helps one recognize the truth that originality does not stipulate for polar departure from what has gone before. Eliot underscores the same view on originality in his essay "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956) in the following words: 'poetic originality is largely an original way of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole' (*SE* 27). It is evident that Eliot uses stealing not in the pejorative sense of thievery but creative use of a material of different origin. Hence he maintains that instead of bothering about non-identicality an artist must manoeuvre to enrich the existing body of ideas or mode of expression. Those who fail to 'steal', that is, shape and transform what has been derived from other source into a new whole, are condemned to bear the disgrace of being a mere imitator, a mere epigone.

Elsewhere, in his essay entitled "Ben Jonson" Eliot glosses depersonalization as 'the process of transfusion of the personality, or...the life, of the author into the character' (*SW* 118). In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), having asserted that the progress of an artist as a 'continual extinction of personality' Eliot proceeds to define the process of depersonalization. He here makes use of the famous catalyst analogy – dipping of a shred of platinum into a pot containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide in order to produce sulphurous acid. The platinum rod is the catalyst, it triggers off the chemical reaction but itself remains unaffected; nor is there any trace of platinum in the sulphurous acid produced in the reaction. Analogously, the mind of a mature poet is a 'perfected medium' in which 'varied feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations' (*SW* 54). A great poet knows how to transform life emotions which are personal into art emotions which are impersonal: 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates' (*SW* 54). True, here Eliot's analogy lacks in scientific precision, for Eliot first describes the poet's mind as 'the shred of platinum', the catalyst or the transforming agent,

and later he describes it as 'a receptacle for seizing and storing up feelings, images, phrases' (*SW* 55). The question however is not how flawless are the correspondences but how effective the equivalent is in elucidating the point made by the author. No one will disagree that minus this analogy, much of the theory of depersonalization in which art 'may be said to approach the condition of science' (*SW* 53) would remain vague to most readers of the essay.

In his critical prose Eliot refrains from using analogy as argument; he always draws a parallel to supplement and not to substitute his point. Frequently, he looks for an analogue to express a view or an opinion that cannot be correctly put across without the help of a correlative detail. In this context one may refer to his interpretation of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* in the essay "Hamlet and His Problems". Going against most critics of his time Eliot asserts that '*Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary' (*SW* 95). Out to vindicate his critical stance he singles out 'the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother' (*SW* 99) as the essential emotion of the play. Eliot alleges that Shakespeare found it difficult to handle the 'intractable' material of the *Ur-Hamlet* and failed to create a functional 'objective correlative' of the emotion. Hence Eliot questions the merit of *Hamlet* as a Shakespearean classic: 'So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure' (98). Eliot comments on the play's metrical irregularity, its scenic superfluity and inconsistency in support of this dismissive statement. However, a critic of Eliot's pedigree cannot ignore the fact that the play has remained singularly appealing for centuries. In order to illustrate this apparently paradoxical position of *the play*, he proceeds to describe *Hamlet* as the '"Mona Lisa" of literature' (*SW* 99). The analogy serves the double purpose of admitting that *Hamlet* is a classic and upholding Eliot's own judgment that people find Hamlet interesting although it does not otherwise conform to accepted aesthetic

standards. The functional importance of the comparison can hardly be exaggerated.

Communication is most successful when readers can *feel* what the author has been trying to convey and this is true not only of emotions but of thoughts. In his two essays on criticism entitled "The Function of Criticism" (1923) and "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956) Eliot discusses the aim and function of criticism. As a critic Eliot is a disparager of impressionism, a debunker of Romanticism and a champion of Classicism. So he is sceptical about the 'Inner Voice' whence the Romantic critics draw their inspiration and chastises the reluctance to have respect for tradition. Not that Eliot is blind to the faults of New Criticism, which without attempting to dig into the author's life or hunt a source or rely too much on personal impression insists on close reading. For its excessive attention to the nuances of words and habit of extracting meaning to the last drop from even the most negligible and the remotest verbal hints, in "The Frontiers of Criticism" Eliot describes this type of textual criticism as the 'lemon-squeezer school of criticism' (*SE* 32). The image of lemon-squeezing which corresponds to the critical method of analyzing a poem 'stanza by stanza and line by line, and extract, squeeze, tease, press every drop of meaning out of it that one can' (*SE* 32) embodies the idea and helps us recognize that limitations of reading between the words.

As a sensible critic Eliot is equally aware of the drawbacks of critical objectivity based on factual information. In "The Function of Criticism" he frowns upon irrelevant information like Shakespeare's laundry bills or how many times the word giraffe occurs in a novel (*SE* 19). Besides, he wants critics to be 'masters and not servants of facts' (*SE* 19). The expression is a warning against incompetent handling of even relevant facts. Through analogous reference to command and control it immediately puts across the Eliotean opinion that critics must not be carried away by the flood of information but rather use these judiciously to provide readers with a fresh

angle of interpretation. In "The Frontiers of Criticism" Eliot reiterates the idea and maintains that factual information which is part of knowledge 'can only lead us to the door: we must find our own way in' (*SE* 36).

Fortification of a point with the help of an analogy sometimes may be a symptom of weakness of argument, as found in the justification of casteism by comparing social hierarchy to hospital wards on grounds that the system of isolation involved is mutually beneficial. Use of analogy of this type may be a devious way of dodging the challenge of rational affirmation. Eliot who in his critical treatises is seldom content with half-cooked thoughts, never concedes to analogy more than its due. He approaches analytically, reasons systematically, and draws his own conclusion adeptly. At places where, for the purpose of smoother communication the idea needs to be brought down from the height of abstract reflection to the tangible plane of understanding, he employs a correlative detail. As such an analogy in Eliot's prose is not a decorative piece used for exhibition of erudition or embellishing the style. It is endowed with the functional properties of elucidation, facilitating comprehension and concretizing what is otherwise too abstract. In "The Function of Criticism" (1923) Eliot identifies 'the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste' (*SE* 11) as the twin functions of criticism. In "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956) Eliot recants his phrases and revising his previous opinion maintains that the end of criticism is to 'promote the understanding and enjoyment of literature' (*SE* 34). In his explicatory remarks Eliot justly asserts that while enjoyment is an emotional activity, and understanding an intellectual activity, they are better not treated as distinct activities, for to understand is 'to enjoy it (a poem) for the right reasons' (*SE* 35). Eliot's critical essays are no literature; yet some consciousness about the functionality of the analogies occasionally used by Eliot is likely to enhance our enjoyment as well as promote fuller understanding of Eliotean critical postulates.

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